

(Re-) Learning the Mass

Part 9 – The Introductory Rites (Continued 2)

Last time we left off with the *Penitential Act*. One final thought about that, which involves gesture. When saying the *Confiteor*, at the part “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” we are asked to ‘strike’ our breast. This is a biblical gesture of sorrow and repentance. For example, after the death of Jesus on the Cross, when the centurion pierces his side and recognizes him as the Son of God, St. Luke tells us “[A]ll the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.” (Luke 23:48). This gesture, which may not be completely familiar to us today, invites us to immerse ourselves in the biblical world, to connect ourselves with it, to be formed by it. There is a tension in liturgical celebration between symbols that come from various cultures, and symbols that derive from the world of the Scriptures, as well as the traditional practice of a particular rite (which comes from yet other cultures). We need them all, so that we can truly enter into what is happening, but also so that we remain connected to the larger reality of the Church beyond our own time and place.

After the Penitential Act, the *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy) follows, unless it was done as the Penitential Act. The origins of this part of the Mass aren’t completely clear, but it is likely that this is what remains of some intercessory prayers which were originally at the beginning of the Mass. In it we continue to focus on our need for God’s mercy. Note that this is the one part of the Roman (Latin) Rite Mass which historically remained in Greek (there is a chant on Good Friday which may also done in Greek, but much more rarely heard). This option, like the gesture above, links us to the earliest Christian communities; the New Testament was written in Greek, and so the Christian people throughout the world have often preserved at least this phrase, whatever other languages their liturgies have grown up with, in the same way we preserve the Hebrew words “Alleluia” and “Amen”.

The *Gloria in Excelsis* (Glory to God) follows on Sundays outside of Advent and Lent and on feast days or other solemn occasions. This is an ancient hymn of the Church, beginning with the words of the song of the angels to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus (Lk 2:14), and being a prayer of praise to the Father and the Son, in the Holy Spirit. It is a type of early Christian hymn which was modeled after the Psalms, which have been the Church’s model for prayer and song. It can be sung by everyone together, or by the people alternately with the choir, or by the choir alone, and cannot be replaced with another song.

The Introductory Rites conclude with a prayer called the “**Collect**”. The priest begins by saying “Let us pray.” But haven’t we already been praying?! These words are actually an invitation to private prayer, for one’s personal intentions. Thus, the Missal says, after these words, “And all pray in silence with the Priest for a while.” (*Roman Missal*, 9). Priests could sometimes use a reminder on this point! The prayer is called the Collect because it ‘collects’ all of our private prayers into the prayer of the whole Church, said by the priest on behalf of all of us gathered. Throughout the liturgy, there is recognition of the need for private prayers along with the public liturgical prayers we do together; this expresses the mystery of the Church, this one Body but which is made up of individuals who do not lose their own identity by joining the Body, but instead find their true fulfilment in union with Christ and his Church.

The form of the Collect shows us something about Christian liturgical prayer. For the most part, it is directed to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. And it expresses the entire movement of the Mass. Usually, the prayer begins by addressing God, and recalling the ways God has acted, and asking God to act again on our behalf. These prayers can be a rich source of meditation, especially in thinking with the wider Church during each liturgical season. You can find each day’s Collect in a daily Missal, or in various places online.

